

For many immigrant students, remote learning during COVID-19 comes with more hurdles

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Schools across the U.S. responded to the COVID-19 pandemic last spring with an [unprecedented shift to remote learning](#) – a trend that has continued [into the new school year](#) for many districts.

Millions of children now use laptops and tablets at home as part of their daily education. This arrangement is neither ideal nor easy. But [immigrant students](#) who are still learning English—often called English learners—face additional complications. Remote learning can be especially challenging for the roughly [5 million students](#) in U.S. schools who are already confronting significant linguistic, sociocultural and [economic challenges](#) as [they navigate learning a new language](#) and their schoolwork simultaneously.

As [scholars of immigration and education](#), we have conducted research into how [immigrant](#) students used technology for learning. Our [recent paper](#) draws on research carried out at a [public high school](#) in the greater Boston area between 2013 and 2016. More than half of the 1,850 students at the school speak a language other than English at home, and 38% of the students are growing up in economic hardship.

The school gave all students a laptop or tablet to promote independent learning and extend their engagement with learning beyond the classroom. From home, students were expected to watch lectures, write papers and ask their teachers questions. But we found that immigrant students were often unable to take advantage of the flexibility that the new technologies provided in the ways their school expected. Instead, they and their teachers worked hard to use the technologies in ways that made sense to support their learning.

Students struggled when their lives outside the classroom were not fully taken into account. Many immigrant students have other responsibilities at home and work, live in multigenerational households and have limited access to Wi-Fi.

As schools implement hybrid and remote learning on a large scale, we recommend that educators consider three key lessons we learned in our research.

1. Access is not the same as equity

Not too long ago, a "digital divide" in education was defined by unequal access to a computer or the internet. But access to technology is no longer the most significant factor in equality. Today, most U.S. students have access to an array of technologies in their classrooms and homes, and inequalities take a more subtle form. Immigrant students who attend the poorest schools may have access to technology, but inadequate training for themselves and their teachers to use technology well—a knowledge gap that will render the use of those technologies less effective. In Massachusetts, [other studies](#) have found that immigrant students learning English are 70% more likely to have underperforming teachers than their English-speaking, nonimmigrant classmates.

Some experts have also [expressed concern](#) that immigrant students are being expected to adjust to an education mandate that was not designed with their learning needs in mind. To use laptops and tablets for learning, students will need ongoing support across a range of areas including assessment, academic content and using the technologies. Our research shows that teachers and immigrant students were able to adapt new technologies to meet their needs over time, but these efforts required investment at all levels. Teachers needed to understand how to support immigrant students in leveraging the available technologies to address their needs, including work schedules and confidence using English, and build on strengths such as their multilingual and multicultural experiences.

2. Language matters

The demands of using a second language to learn remotely are different to those of in-class learning. Participation in a discussion, clarifying a concept or completing an assignment are all dependent on immigrant

students' comfort using English. In our research, many immigrant students who were still learning English found it difficult to communicate complex ideas through texting or commenting functions. Rather, they preferred the more nuanced conversations that they could have with their teacher and peers in person. Spontaneity, visual cues and [community support](#) all contributed to the kinds of academic conversations students needed. Teachers concurred that meaningful academic conversations were "just easier in person," particularly for students who were less confident in their English language skills.

Conversely, students and teachers found that technology provided opportunities for immigrant students who were learning English to utilize their bilingual skills to learn more. Students used apps like [Google Translate](#) to get the gist of longer texts quickly, enabling them to dive deeper into academic content. As learning during the pandemic spurs fear of students falling behind, it may be useful to remember that bilingualism is an asset that can support remote learning too.

3. Many immigrant students work

Many immigrant students [work to support their families](#). For example, one of the participants in our study, "Victor," was a 17-year-old junior who worked at a high-end restaurant downtown. He worked five days a week from afternoon until midnight. Balancing full-time school with a full-time job was not easy, but it was necessary.

"The money I get from the restaurant I use to pay all my bills," he told us. "My phone, the rent, to send money to my mom" in Colombia. This was a common experience for the immigrant students we spoke to. During the pandemic, many of them have continued to work full time.

Other immigrant students reported responsibilities at home such as child care, cooking, cleaning, bill-paying and translating for other family

members that precluded doing homework or communicating with teachers and classmates on their laptops as schools might expect. Before the pandemic, teachers were able to create flexible, independent learning spaces for students in class that supported academic achievement and continuity of learning goals and led to a better understanding of students' lives. A similar shift in thinking about how to do remote learning will need to take place for immigrant students to maintain their [school](#)-work balance during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Supporting tech

Technology can be a powerful tool for learning. But it isn't a [teacher](#).

Our research shows that careful planning based on a deep familiarity with immigrant students' lives makes a big difference. There is a very real danger that the move to remote learning could reinforce the very inequalities immigrant students already encounter in U.S. schools. We argue that remote learning must be calibrated to attend to the needs of those students at the margins. New funding and policy changes need to support those students who are less familiar with remote learning or have limited access to new technologies, are learning English or who have competing responsibilities.

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